

Invasive beetle attacks redbay trees

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A beetle imported from Asia is spreading around the southeast United States, leaving dead and dying redbay trees in its wake.

The redbay ambrosia beetle is believed to have entered the country through Savannah, Ga., in 2002, probably in a wood pallet or packing case. It has spread into the Carolinas and south to Florida, where it was spotted for the first time last summer in Brevard County in central Florida, Florida Today reports.

The beetle produces a fungus that spreads throughout a tree, eventually killing it. The fungus nourishes more generations of beetles.

"I call them fungus farmers," said Albert Mayfield, forest entomologist for the Florida Division of Forestry.

In Asia, scientists say, the beetle usually attacks only diseased or dying trees. But in the United States, it goes after healthy ones.

Federal forestry experts are collecting redbay seeds to preserve the genetic stock. In Florida, campers have been asked not to carry firewood around to keep the fungus from spreading.

The redbay is an important tree in Florida's coastal forests. The beetle has also attacked avocado trees, raising fears for one of the state's important crops.

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